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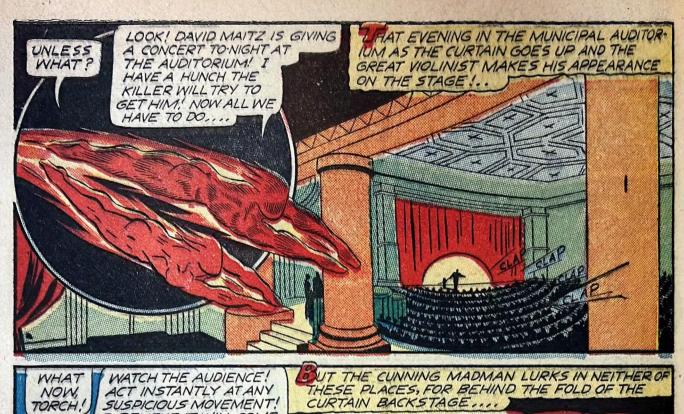
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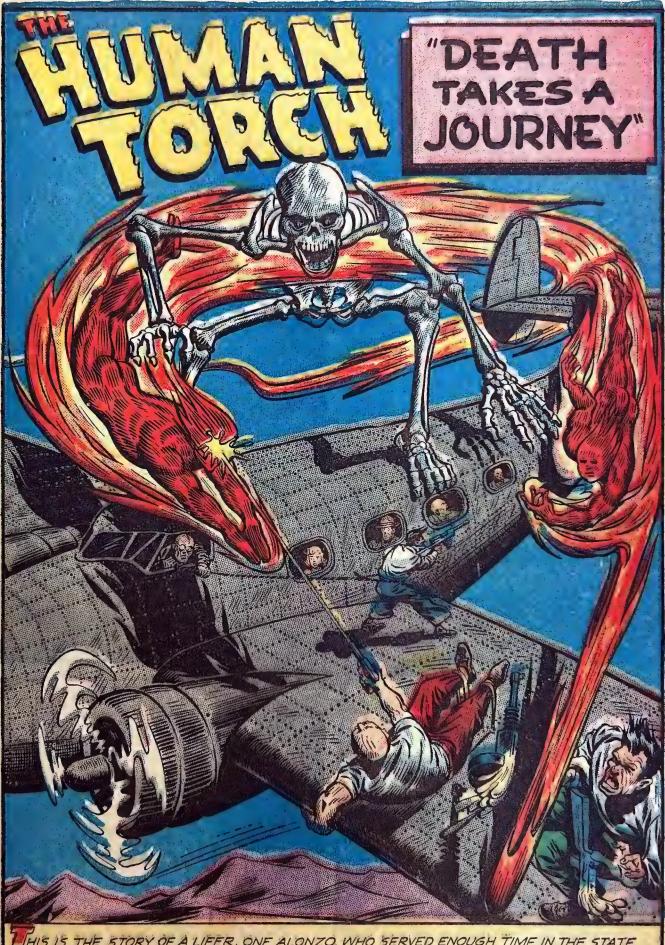












THIS IS THE STORY OF A LIFER, ONE ALONZO, WHO SERVED ENOUGH TIME IN THE STATE PEN BEFORE HIS ESCAPE TO PLOT WHAT HE THOUGHT WOULD BE THE PERFECT CRIME... BUT AS USUAL, THERE IS UNVARIABLY A SLIP UP, OR FATE SOMETIMES TAKES A HAND... IN THIS CASE IT IS THE HUMAN TORCH AND TORO WHOM FATE SELECTS FOR THE TASK OF BRINGING ALONZO AND HIS GANG TO JUSTICE IN THIS THRILLING DEATH DEFYING TALE OF ADVENTURE....





















Reconciliation

ONEY had gone to Tad's head, that's what. Clay banged the skillet onto the hook back of the stove, stamped over to wipe the crumbs from the table. He didn't like this business of having to clean house. Now that Tad had struck it rich and had pulled out on his own hook, Clay had to do it every day for himself, instead of every other day. They'd taken turns before.

Yes, sir. It had sure gone to his head. He was splurging too much on equipment. Not only for his mining but for himself. He'd gone into Hookers Run and come back fit to kill, all decked out in fancy togs, hat and shoes.

Tad had really struck it rich. Clay had seen some of the dust and a couple of pea-sized nuggets. Clay had advised cautiously, "Keep your find under your hat for a while. Somebody'll get wind of it, and next thing you know you'll have a slug between your ribs."

"Aw, go chase yourself," Tad had chortled, "Sour grapes. You're just sore because you

didn't have my luck."

Tad dug up dynamite and a detonator, and then had pulled out, bag and baggage, to live by himself back in the hills.

Clay felt sorry for the old boy. He'd been a pretty swell partner all these years. They'd batted around the wilderness country together, had shared good and bad luck between them. With Tad gone now, the world seemed an empty place. Clay started for the door. Couple more weeks like this one and he'd go nuts—

Clay paused sharply as a man stepped into the doorway, swung a carbine up. "Stand still," the man snarled. "One move outta you and you're dead!"

No use arguing about that, Clay decided. The carbine had him pinned squarely. "Squint," Clay muttered uneasily. "What in tarnation you putting on an act for?"

"You'll live longer if you mind your own

business," Squint retorted. "I'll ask the questions. Where's old Tad got his diggings?"

LAY waited, his heart pounding uneasily at his side. Squint Logger was the town's good-for-nothing. He'd been in more shady deals, and just managed to get by, than you could shake a stick at.

"Tad," Clay said warily, "ain't here. What's

your business with him?"

"My business," the newcomer retorted sharply. "What I asked is where is he?"

"Out working," Clay answered, steadying himself. "If you're figuring on making trouble—"

"Not for myself," Squint corrected, his narrow face twisting in a malicious grin. "Tad's been blowing all over town about how he's struck pure gold. He must have plenty cached somewhere. And he's been blowing off about how you and he quarreled. Said you had it in for him, now he's struck it rich. So when I get through . . . you're gonna be the one to talk, Or swing!"

Clay didn't answer. His body was tense with anger. It was all Tad's bull-headed fault. He would have to spill everything in Hookers Run. He and his big mouth. And if Squint meant what he seemed to mean . . .

Squint laughed harshly. "Tad's gonna get a dose of hot lead. His gold's gonna be gone. And I'm fixing it so's you'll swing for his murder. You're gonna be the guy who killed Tad!"

"You can't do that!" Clav shouted angrily.

"Why, you-"

"Sit down!" Squint snarled. "Right there. Or else you both get it!"

There wasn't anything to do about it now, Clay realized, as he obediently took a seat in the chair.

Squint finished tying Clay's hands and legs to the chair. "You'll be okay till I get through with old Tad," Squint cracked. "Rest yourself, Grandpa. You'll meet the sheriff afore long!"

OR a while after Squint had gone, Clay tried to relax. It hurt to think that, after all these years, he'd be the one to take the rap for old Tad's murder. Besides which, Tad and Clay hadn't ever been exactly prosperous. And now, just when Tad had struck it rich, and could really have a little fun...

Clay shook his head. He had to get out of this some way. He couldn't let Tad die, couldn't

let Squint get away with a dirty trick like this. Cautiously Clay worked the chair around. There wasn't much of anything he could get his hands on. Not with his arms strapped back to the chair like this.

There was the hatchet in the wood box back of the stove. Gingerly he worked the chair over to the box. Carefully he inched the hatchet out till he had a good grip. By twisting his hand just at the wrist he was able to swing the blade across to the opposite side of the chair. He got the edge on the cords binding him, sawed back and forth carefully. No doubt he'd take off a little hide before he got done. . . .

Some hide came off, but fifteen minutes later later Clay jumped up, tore the remaining cords from his arms and legs and stumbled toward the door. Squint had taken all possible weapons. It would also take him a while to find where Tad was working . . .

Clay sprinted across the clearing, plunged into the path leading back into the hills. In a little while he came down in a clearing on either side of a gorge. It was very still down here, not even the sound of blue-jays in the pine groves . . .

THE crack of a carbine sounded sharply ahead along the gorge. Clay clutched at the gnarled trunk of a tree. Was he too late? Had Squint already shot and killed old Tad?

Grimly Clay pushed on, more cautiously now, breath a little short in his chest. He must be getting old, alright. But he couldn't let Squint get away with this. He'd have to find him, catch him somehow ...

Peering out of the protective fringe of trees, Clay stared down the slope. His sharp eyes picked up an object lying in the grass. A body . . . The body of Tad-

Away to his right a little further was another object. The detonator Tad had been going to use. Evidently he'd been about to blast that rocky ledge above the stream, when Squint had fired at him from the woods . , .

Recklessly, Clay broke into a run. All thought of personal danger was gone from his mind, as he sprinted down the slope, stooped above the fallen body of his one-time partner.

"Tad," Clay croaked hoarsely. "Tad-"

Tad didn't answer. Clay gathered the still form into his arms, turned and stumbled back up the slope. He could feel a prickly sensation at his back . . . that was probably Squint getting his sights lined up on his spine . . .

UT Clay reached the edge of the woods, forced his way into them and put Tad down on the ground. A swift inspection disclosed that Tad had been creased across the side of the head. Another inch and he'd have been a But with a doctor's care, right gone goose. quick.-Grimly Clay peered back down the sunlit slope. He could still see nothing but the wooded hills, the rock gorge at the bottom, rising into rough crags above the stream . . .

Someone came out of the woods to the rocky ledge above the stream. Squint. Clay's breath caught sharply. Squint had the carbine, while Clay had nothing at all. But there was a chance ... if Tad had placed the charge of dynamite where it seemed most logical, and if he had had

it connected, ready to blast

It was a grave chance, the only chance. Clay gathered his muscles, flung himself from the woods and raced down hill. But if Tad hadn't hooked the charge up-

The crack of the carbine sounded. A swift look showed Squint sighting along the carbine-

The detonator-Clay flung himself forward, clawing at the handle, jerking it out and plung-

ing it back again-

The crumbling roar that reached his ears was almost like music. Glaring up he saw the rocky ledge upon which Squint stood crumbling like dust, saw Squint's body crashing forward, tumbling down into the mass of dust and rock . . .

LAY knelt on the ground, finished the make-shift bandage on Tad's grizzled head.

"It's your fault," Clay growled, "Blabbing all over town about how you struck it rich. This may teach you a lesson. I'll help you get back to Hookers Run and see the doc. But from then on . . . you scrape your own chestnuts outta the fire. You're nothing but a bull-headed old cuss anyhow ... " He stopped.

Tad was grinning foolishly as he sat up, leaned against a tree. "Okay." Tad growled. "Okay. You win. Maybe it did kind of go to my head, but I'm okay now."

"What do you mean, you're okay?"

Tad hesitated, color flushing his leathery cheeks. He said slowly, "Shucks, I guess we been partners too long to bust up now. So if it's okay by you . . . we'll shake and start over again!"

Clay gripped the strong hand.

THE END



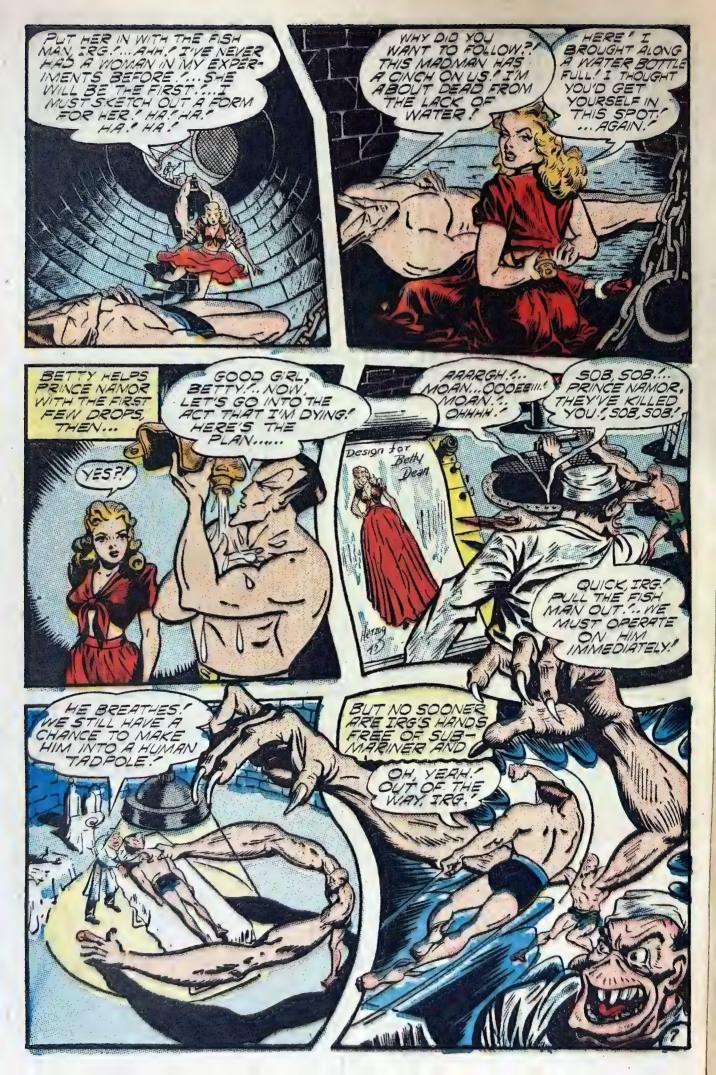














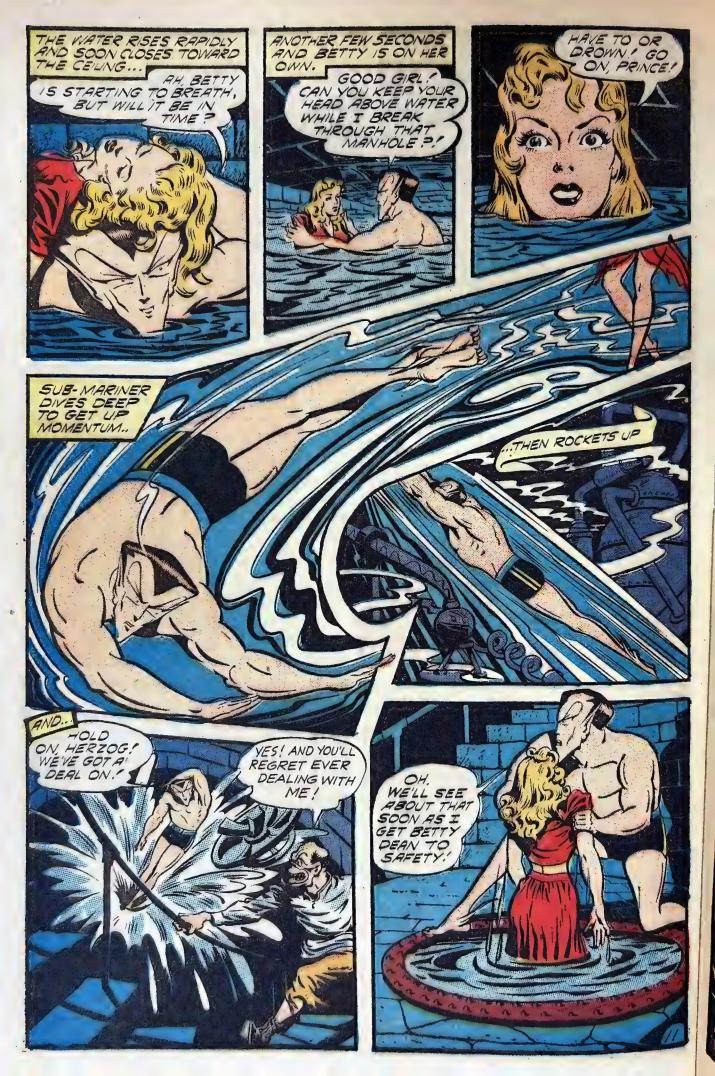




















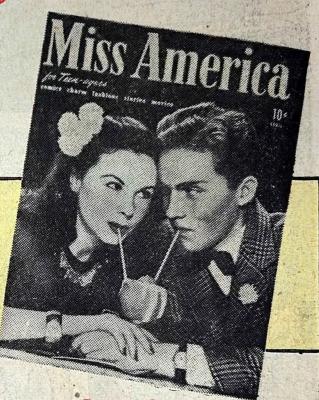
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